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Washington Report
by HENRY A. WAXMAN
Congressman, 24th District

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As Rosh Hashana approaches my thoughts turn to the Russian Jews. The year 5735 has not been a good one for Soviet Jewry. Permits to leave the Soviet Union were issued in far smaller numbers than in past years. Oppression within the Soviet Union has remained the same or even increased. Perhaps saddest of all, it has become increasingly difficult for the Jews of the U.S.S.R. to communicate with Jews and non-Jews around the world who are sympathetic to their cause.

My concern with the communications problems of Soviet Jewry increased sharply as the result of a meeting with Si Frumkin. Frumkin, founder and chairman of the Southern California Council for Soviet Jews, shared with me some of the information that he and members of his organization have accumulated on the difficulties in keeping open lines of communication to and from the Soviet Union.

According to Frumkin, almost no mail sent non-registered and at the regular rate is delivered to Soviet Jews. For quite some time the Council has urged people writing to the Soviet Union to send all mail registered. Under the terms of the Universal Postal Convention, to which both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. subscribe, a country which fails to deliver registered mail is responsible for it and charged a set price per undelivered piece. The sender is supposed to file a claim for lost mail with the United States Postal Service which, in

turn, is supposed to provide either proof of delivery or payment for loss.

A very substantial proportion of letters mailed "registered" by American citizens to Soviet citizens are never delivered. Si Frumkin reports a shocking lack of both efficiency and concern by U.S. postal authorities. Post office personnel are not familiar with the rules regarding registered mail. Even properly prepared claims are handled inefficiently. Many claims received no response and must be filed again.

There are also severe problems with telephonic communications. Many Soviet Jews have had their telephone service disconnected. It is not unusual for a Soviet citizen, who has done nothing wrong even by Soviet standards, to have his telephone removed on the grounds he has been using it for "anti-state" purposes.

Even having a telephone in Russia is not nearly as beneficial as one might think. The Soviets, by their own admission, "monitor" a huge number of phone calls. Especially singled out for a government eavesdropping are calls from abroad. Every American should know that calls he makes to the Soviet Union are probably being listened to by Soviet officials.

The delivery of Western Union telegrams is hardly better than the delivery of mail or the making of phone calls. Few telegrams are delivered and the transmitter, Western Union, shows little or no concern. Of 350 cables sent to Vladimir Slepak by Council for Soviet Jews members, only five were ever received!

The only thing worse than being in prison is being in prison and being denied contact with the outside world. It is vital for Soviet Jews to be able to communicate with the rest of the world. They desperately need to know of our concern. I am looking into possible steps the American government might take to increase freedom of communication.

I look to the New Year with the hope that it will bring a reduction of barriers and tensions which divide individuals and nations. I hope we will all have moments in our prayers devoted to those Soviet Jews who languish behind some of the most cruel and impenetrable barriers ever constructed.